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# SHAKER CLOTHING





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# *Shaker Clothing*

by

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The Warren County Historical Society

Lebanon, Ohio

## *Shaker Clothing*

The Shakers were a socio-religious group whose official title was The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. The nucleus of the Shaker theology was their belief in the second appearance of Christ in the person of their founder Ann Lee.

The three fundamental doctrines of their faith were purity, community, and separation. Purity at first meant freedom from carnal indulgence, but later was expanded to include every facet of the life of the Shakers. Community signified putting the good of the community above that of the individual. Separation, meant not so much individual separation, but rather, the separation of the Shaker community as a whole from the evils of society. Although Shakers put away that which was worldly, they had a great deal of reverence for the earth and nature as the handiwork of God.

In conjunction with these three fundamental doctrines were twelve basic principles, the observance of which led to complete compliance with the three great doctrines. These twelve principles were: honesty, continence, faith, hope, charity, innocence, meekness, humility, prudence, thankfulness, patience, and simplicity.

This simplicity is most evident today in viewing the products of the Shaker communities. In the Shaker philosophy simplicity and beauty were synonymous. Simplicity was viewed as the elemental expression of purity and unity with God.

The Shaker concept of work as worship was expressed by the Shaker axiom that work must be done as if "you had a thousand years to live, and as if you were to die tomorrow." Thus indifference had no place in the Shaker community and every piece of Shaker workmanship is a masterpiece of strength, simplicity, and beauty.

The Shaker desire for a perfect oneness with God was reflected in the attitude with which they approached every aspect of their communal and personal lives. They were functionalists in every thing they did. They bred and developed the Poland China hog, which was the most perfect animal of its kind. They improved numerous household work items such as the traditional round twig broom, which they modified into the flat straw broom in common use today. Perhaps the epitome of Shaker functional design was the invention of the wooden clothespin.

The Shakers as a community of people, were almost a monastic society. The uniqueness of their culture is illustrated not only in their doctrine and dogma, but in the patterns of the Shakers' every day life. Even such simple things as the food they ate and the clothing they wore were reflections of their search for unity. Paradoxically, this search for unity with God led to a need for separation from the world was the adoption of a uniform way of dressing, indigenous to the Shaker colonies.

In 1776 the first Shaker community commenced at Watervliet, New York. These early Shakers had no clothing standard. They wore whatever they had worn in worldly society as farmers or tradesmen.



At this time, Shakers did wear buttons and buckles. During the early years of Shakerism it was customary for men to wear stocks, knee breeches, and buckled shoes. Buckles were necessarily employed to hold the stocks in place, and the knee breeches taut at the knee. Shaker buttons were however, made from the less precious metals such as steel or pewter. Early Shaker men also wore a great many buttons on their jackets and vests. Not only the buttons necessary for closure were worn, but purely decorative ones, which adorned the sleeve cuffs and coat tails.

Although Shaker clothing was always quite simple, more colors and fabric designs were employed than might be expected of such simplistically inclined people. At different times throughout Shaker history, the brethren deviated from the more modest colors of black, gray, and butternut to wear suits of indigo blue. The sisters often wore blue checked aprons and head kerchiefs, or blue and white striped dresses and blue petticoats. The children who lived in the Shaker colonies sometimes wore muted red clothing which had been dyed in the vats after dyeing carpet binding. Even though Shakers did allow their members some freedom in the color and fabric design of their clothing, uniformity was maintained. No member had anything not readily available to others. It is true that the Shakers feared display of human vanity however, a very pragmatic reason existed to keep the uniformity. That is, it was much simpler and less expensive to limit the manufacture of cloth to a few specific colors, designs, and fabric blends.

A Shaker tailor from New Lebanon, New York, wrote an account in 1858 describing the evolution from the varied costumes worn by the early Shaker converts to the uniforms adopted by the organized believers which were designed with the functions of Shaker life in mind. As well as having summer and winter clothes, the Shakers also had journey clothes, work clothes, and Sabbath uniforms.

For carrying out their every day tasks, the early Shaker men wore coats, vests, shirts, and knee breeches as common in the rest of America in the late 18th century. These were similar to the costumes worn by the tradesmen in reconstructed Williamsburg (Va.) today.

The knee breeches were black and worn with black stockings. A strap with a large brass buckle secured the breeches just below the knee and held the stockings in place. The breeches were ornamented by four buttons at the outside of each knee.

The vest and coat were of the same fabric as the breeches and were also black. The vest was made of one piece of material, so that the front and back were of the same good quality, another example of the conscientious manner which Shakers approached every task. The vest had a row of twelve buttons down the front and two large pocket flaps at the waist. The coat was similarly designed with duplicate pocket flaps also located at the waist. The design of the pocket flaps is very interesting because of its intricate nature; the lower edge was cut in two inverted scallops which terminated in a central point. The coat had six inch cuffs and a pleated skirt which attached at the waist. Buttons decorated each cuff and the top of each pleat.

The shirt worn with this suit was made of white linen, was collarless, and had very large sleeves. It was necessary to use sleeve ties to keep the large sleeves from dragging and interfering with the activities of the wearer. The ties were of blue silk. When the men were working, the shirt became the upperpart of their uniform, since the vest and coat were removed during working time.

With the collarless shirt, the early Believers wore a blue silk stock at the neck. Later these stocks were made from blue linen. The stock was a piece of stiffened material



about 2½ or 3 inches wide which fastened at the back of the neck with a buckle and gradually, these stiffened stocks were replaced with simple white neckerchiefs of cotton, silk or linen.

Shoes were made from calfskin and fastened with straps and buckles. This was the same type of shoe commonly worn all over colonial America.

Shaker brethren wore hats of fur or wool similar to the hats worn by the Amish men today. They were broad brimmed, the brim being five or more inches wide, and low crowned, the height of the crown being four inches.

Greatcoats, cloaks, and surtouts (as overcoats were called) completed the ensemble needed for daily wear. These greatcoats and cloaks were made from neutral colored woolen cloth and were in great demand in the non-Shaker world because of their great warmth and fine workmanship.

As the Shaker clothing evolved into a more functional uniform, knee breeches were exchanged for trousers, which were more practical. These first trousers were made with a vee shaped insert at the waist, which had eyelets with a lacing arrangement allowing the trousers to be adjustable and self-sustaining. Trousers for everyday wear were made from a poor quality linen called tow cloth. For winter wear trousers were made from wool or serge.

The common color for the early trousers was indigo. However, in 1806 due to the expense of obtaining indigo dye, and the difficulty in processing this dye, steel gray became the standard color.

With some slight variations, this was the standard apparel for Shaker men in 1805 when Isaacher Bates, Benjamin Seth Youngs and Joseph Meacham left the Watervliet (NY.) colony on an evangelical mission. This journey took

them through New York, Philadelphia, & Baltimore in the East and into the frontier areas of Kentucky, Tennessee and ultimately to Warren County, Ohio. Here they founded Union Village, which became the center of Shakerism in the West.

Bates, Meacham and Youngs stopped at the home of Malcolm Worley which was at the Turtle Creek Settlement, called Beedle Station. Worley, a Presbyterian Elder, became the first Shaker convert in the West. After the conversion of Worley and his family a Negro slave by the name of Anna Middletown was converted. Then in close order came Richard McNemar, the Presbyterian minister, and his family.

McNemar's first impression of the delegates had been a favorable one. He liked their plain, neat, old fashioned dress, their white fur hats, gray coats, blue waistcoats, and beautiful brown overalls.

This account of Shaker dress in 1805 differs only slightly from the one given by the Shaker tailor. The major difference being that the tailors account states that the trousers were made of blue cloth while the McNemar account stresses the beauty of the brown overalls.

In 1810 the Shaker uniform underwent another extreme change. The coat and vest were modified to conform to a more modest style and the color of the men's uniform was changed from gray to neutral.

The greatest modification was in the design of the jacket and vest. The skirt of both garments was simplified to eliminate large double pleats at each side. These were supplanted by one smaller single fold pleat located at the central portion of the coattail. The decorative pocket flaps were modified to simple curve, which eliminated the elaborate inverted scallop and point design. A one and one-half inch collar, rather like a mandarin collar was added to

the jacket. A small shoulder length cape was also added to the jacket. True to utilitarian principles, all buttons were eliminated, even the ones required for fastening. These buttons were replaced by two or three pairs of hooks and eyes.

A new way of fitting clothes was instituted. Previously although a person's girth was taken into consideration when making a suit, all jackets, vests, and shirts were made the same length. This practice caused Shaker clothing to have a dowdy look, for the jacket of one man might reach his knees while that of another might barely reach his hips. The new fitting practice took a person's height into consideration.

A slight alteration was made in the construction of trousers, the adjustable lacing insert was omitted and suspenders were adopted as the common way to secure trousers.

Shoe buckles were discarded as being frivolous. They were replaced by eyelets and laces of cotton or leather.

Later (possibly about 1820) the long sleeved white shirts ceased to be the upper part of the Shaker man's work uniform. A more practical colored smock was adopted for every day wear with trousers. The smocks came in various muted colors, varying from muted red or green to neutral, brown, and tan. These smocks had short cuffless sleeves which ended about the middle of the wearer's forearm, so as not to interfere with his labors. The sleeve was held close to the arm by a slash-placket arrangement with a button. The smock had to be pulled on over the head for the neck opening was only about 10 inches long. This opening was fastened by 4 buttons. The smock was constructed with a yoke across the shoulders to which a small stand up collar of about 1½ inches was attached. There were several small pleats in the body of the smock where it attached to the yoke, allowing the wearer freedom of movement. This practical garment was worn for many years as the Shaker work uniform.



Apparently the Shakers at Union Village (Ohio) were not skilled in the manufacture of fur hats. An entry in the Union Village Journal (pg. 109) dated June 8, 1837 states, "Brought from Lebanon a lot of fur hats for all the grown brethren. This is the first time we have ever got a fur hat apiece--none heretofore but occasional ones."

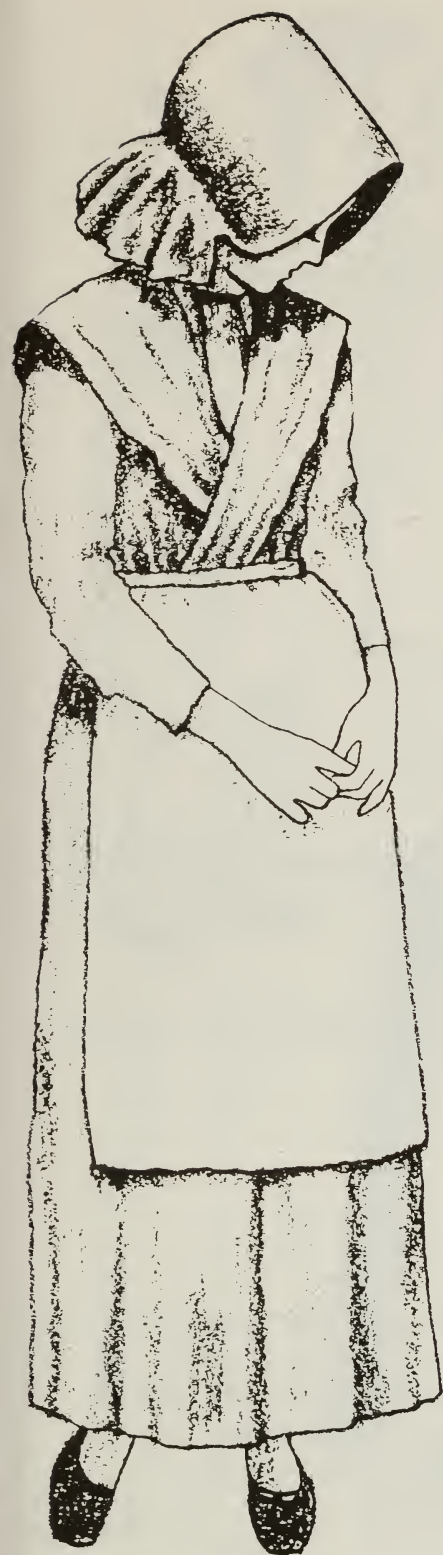
After the Civil War straw hats became quite popular among the Shakers for every day wear in the summer. These were easily manufactured in the individual colonies, so there was no difficulty in procurement. However, fur hats were kept as part of the Sabbath uniform and wool hats continued to be worn in the winter.

Eventually as Shakerism became more secular, the smock evolved into a shirt again. The basic construction of the shirt was the same as that of the smock with the small upright collar band, but the shirt-tail was made long enough to tuck into the trousers. The muted colors of the smock were laid aside and the shirts were all white. For everyday wear an indigo vest was worn over the white shirt. This vest was very plain and hung below the hips of the wearer. These shirts and vests were common work garments for the brethren in later years. Brethren dressed in this fashion were often seen on the streets of Lebanon (Ohio) until the Shakers left Union Village in 1912.

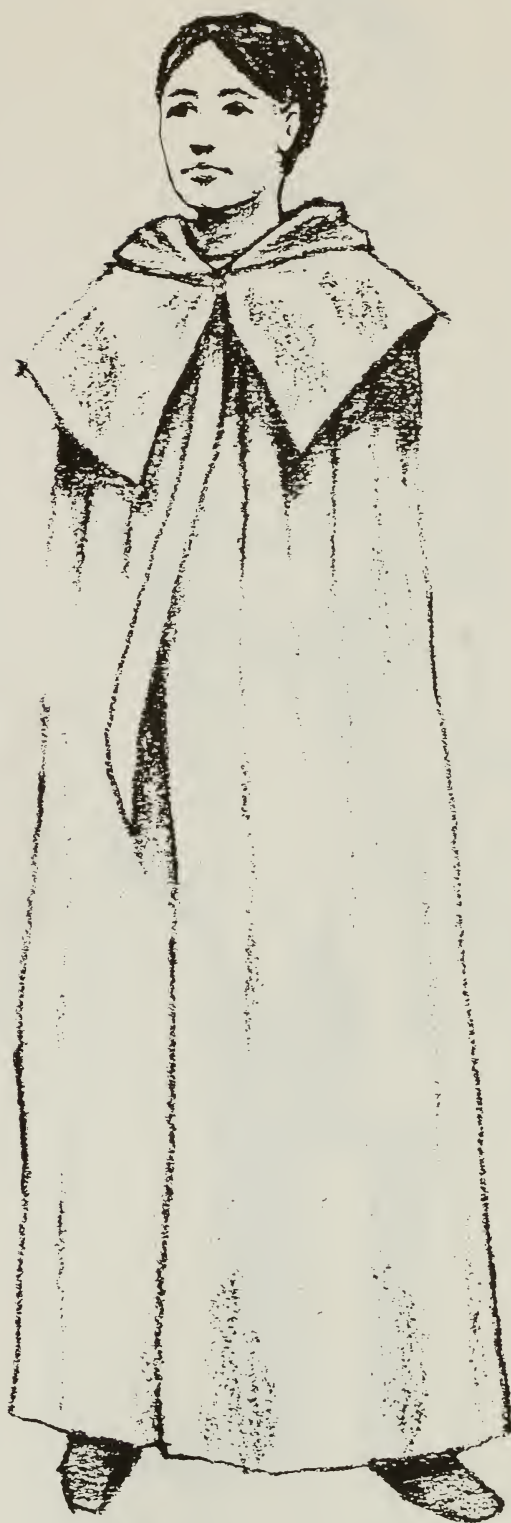
The history of clothing worn by Shaker women also reveals an evolution from temporal fashion to a uniform of utilitarian simplicity.

The first Shaker converts were rural New Englanders. Thus the garb worn by early Shaker sisters was similar to the ensemble worn by other New England farm women.

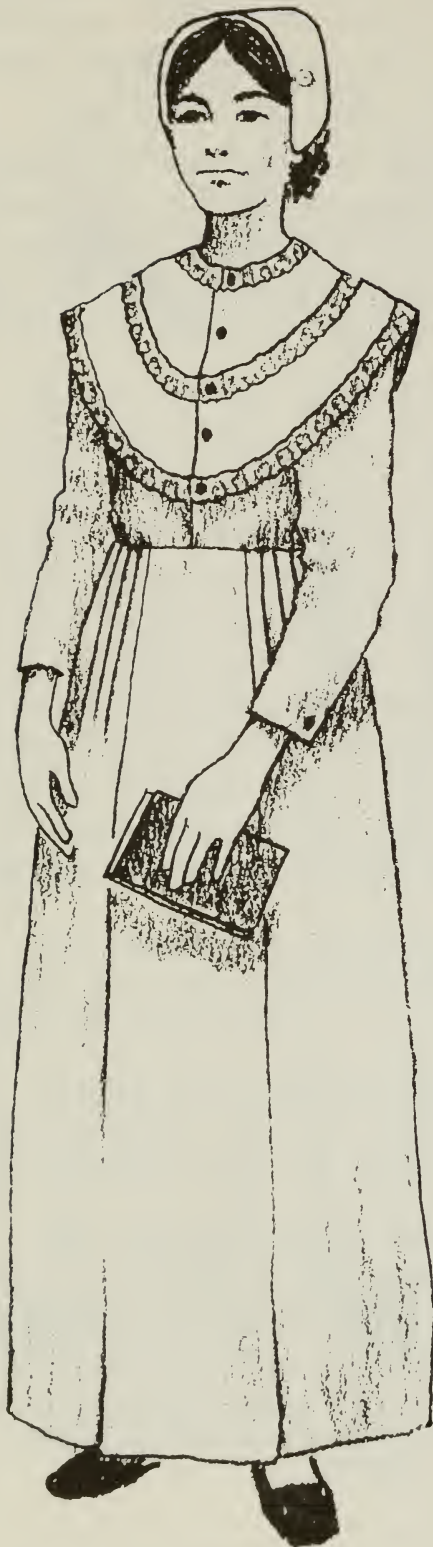
The earliest Shaker costume to which the sisters conformed consisted of a basic dress for summer, which was at first black and then blue linen. The dress had elbow length sleeves and a small round, collarless neckline. The skirt was not shirred but made full by the use of small pleats.



Womans outdoor working clothes. Sugar Scoop bonnet mid to late 19th century.



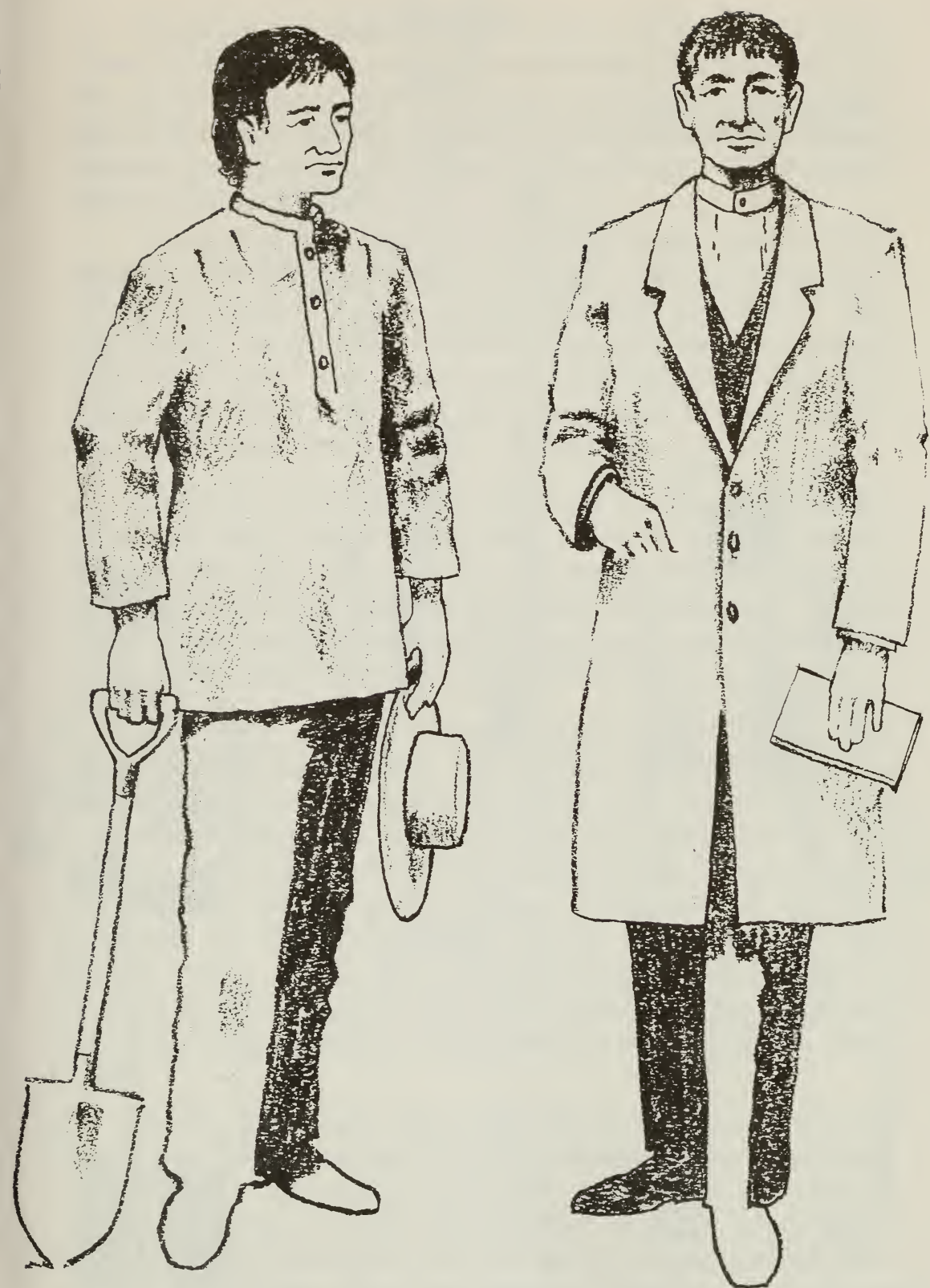
Dorothy Cloak, mid to late 19th century



Woman's indoor working clothes

Late 19th early 20th century  
 Womans Sabbath Day dress  
 (Drawing made from actual dress  
 in Warren County, Ohio,  
 Historical Society Museum,  
 Lebanon, Ohio.





Mens Working clothes and Sabbath  
Day clothes. Both late 19th century.

Man's working clothes  
mid to late 19th century.



Frontview of surcoat



Man's Sabbath Day surcoat  
& Shaker hat. Rear view mid-  
eighteenth century.



In winter the Shaker sisters wore a floor length basic dress of blue wool or serge. The skirt had two box pleats at the center of the back. The bodice was fitted with a dropped waist which ended in a point at the center back. These dresses had close fitting elbow length sleeves which ended with a pleated ruffle.

A short gown was worn over the basic dress. This short gown was a smock-type overblouse with short sleeves.

It had a fitted waistline and a short gathered skirt. The hem length varied from below the knee to only ten inches below the waist. The "short gown" was generally blue and white striped with perpendicular stripes on the body of the dress and horizontal stripes on the sleeves.

The front of the skirt was covered by a long blue checked apron which reached just an inch above the hem of the dress. The apron had an inch wide band of white material and white tape was sewn to the band to form string. These tapes were wrapped around the body and returned to the front where they met and were tied in a bow.

With this ensemble the sisters wore a black silk shoulder kerchief. After the Shaker women learned to weave a fine white lawn the kerchiefs were made from that for a number of years. Then in about 1818 several of the colonies in Kentucky and Ohio (including Union Village) began a successful venture in the culture of silk worms, and silk kerchiefs of several different muted colors became the Shaker mode. After 1810 a short stand-up collar with an attached shoulder length cape was worn over the shoulder kerchief when the sisters were not actively engaged in their tasks.

During the early years and for a considerable time thereafter Shaker sisters wore high heeled shoes. The first shoes were of the strap and buckle type. The heels were blocks of wood covered with leather and the soles were leather, while the uppers were of cloth. In later periods the straps and buckles were laid aside for laces.



All adult sisters wore a small close fitting linen or cotton cap. The cap was pleated and gathered to fit the head well. The front of the cap was bordered by a one inch strip of open work. The back hem was gathered into a tape. The tape was brought forward and up to cross on top of the cap and returned to tie at the back. A border of 3 inch leno was attached in 1819 and at that time the method of securing the cap changed. The tapes were brought forward around the neck and returned to tie at the nape of the neck. Most Shaker women had their hair cut rather short and wore a hair net to keep their hair flat enough for the small cap to fit closely.

When Shakerism began the women in farming areas of America wore a small flat hat, called a chip hat. This was formed of braided straw and covered both inside and out with black silk. It had a brim of at least six inches width and a crown of about one inch. A silk ribbon was attached to the crown and brought down over both sides of the brim and tied securely at the back of the neck. The Shaker women adopted the chip hat for their use wearing it over the cap.

In 1805 the Shaker women began wearing the "Quaker" bonnet. These were easier to make and simpler than the chip hat to keep on while working. They were made from a pasteboard foundation and covered with silk. The crown was entirely cloth and gathered in to fit the head.

Beginning in 1827 Shaker bonnets were made from woven palm leaves. In 1837 Abner Beedle invented a palm leaf weaving loom and bonnet manufacture began at Union Village. "The leaves were sized and dampened. The longer leaves were used for warp and the shorter pieces for filling or woof." When completed the woven pieces were known as "chips." There were two woven sections, a front piece and a crown. They were sewed together and the bonnet was lined with silk and a short cape of about four inches was gathered around the bottom of the bonnet to cover the neck.

The palm leaves for bonnets were imported from Cuba and were also used in the manufacture of fans. The Shaker palm leaf fans were sold in nearby villages and towns to churches and funeral homes. In Lebanon, Mr. Morris Oswald purchased palm leaf fans from the Shakers for his undertaking establishment.

The Civil War interrupted the palm leaf trade and Shakers were forced to find another material from which to weave bonnets. Straw was easily adapted to the Shaker bonnet manufacture and even in the 1920's Shaker women in the East were still wearing straw bonnets.

Shaker sisters continued to wear a uniform of a basic dress, with shoulder kerchief and cape, checked apron and cap.

As in most groups, where uniformity is a virtue, the Shakers governed the amount of clothing owned by one individual. An order of May 10, 1840 listed the following clothing allowance for "Females under 26; 2 outside gowns, 2 worsted gowns, 33 common winter gowns, 3 common summer gowns, 1 white gown, 2 cotton and worsted gowns, 2 light colored gowns, 2 cloaks, 2 winter petticoats, 3 summer petticoats, 1 white petticoat, 2 good checked aprons, 2 good winter aprons, 6 kitchen aprons, 9 shifts, 3 palm bonnets, 1 pair nice leather shoes, 1 pair wash shoes, 6 pair cloth shoes, 2 pair socks, 16 pair stockings, 10 common neck handkerchiefs, 8 white neck handkerchiefs, 16 caps, 12 collars, 3 pair undersleeves, 8 underjackets, 2 white handkerchiefs, 2 fine checked handkerchiefs and common handkerchiefs.

Both Shaker men and women had special Sabbath uniforms. These uniforms were somewhat different from the everyday and travel garb previously described. They were different primarily for the spiritual significance which they held. Paralleling the custom followed in their everyday wear, the early Shakers had Sabbath clothing which did not radically differ from their worldly contemporaries.



The men wore uniforms consisting of a jacket (with shoulder cape) and vest of blue, a white shirt with white stock, knee breeches of black or blue, brass buckled shoes and a white fur hat. The Brethren took their coats off to dance during the Sabbath services.

Soon after coming to Warren County the men began to wear gray coats with nut gall (khaki) trousers. About ten years thereafter the brethren began to wear blue and white striped cotton trousers. Sometime about 1820 they adopted drab (neutral) colored jackets for Sunday wear. After switching from drab to blue and back again in 1854, blue jackets became the standard. Several years later they began to wear blue and white striped linen trousers and continued with that fashion.

The sisters had both summer and winter Sabbath costumes. The winter outfit was a basic long gown of butternut color, worsted with a blue and white checked apron. Their shoulder kerchiefs were blue cotton. They wore white lawn or linen caps and cloth high-heeled shoes.

In summer the sisters wore short sleeved white or light colored striped gowns over black or blue petticoats. Their kerchiefs were black silk or white lawn. Soon after the founding of Union Village, a change was instituted in Sabbath wear and the sisters began to wear white kerchiefs over white collars with capes. The heels of their shoes were lowered to a more sensible height. About 1835 the sisters began to wear an all white Sabbath costume in all Shaker colonies. However, this custom began earlier at Union Village for the journal from there states, "June 10, 1827. Our sisters appeared in meeting today, dressed in white garments for the first time. It looked like a crowd of saints." An outsider from the area who visited the Shakers on the Sabbath remarked however, that the sisters looked "like a gaggle of geese."



There was a religious reason for the wearing of the white uniforms.

Each commune had a sacred place, at Union Village it was called Jehova's Chosen Square. Twice a year a religious festival was held and a pilgrimage was made to this holy place. The day before the pilgrimage was a day of fasting, confession, and prayer. The evening before, a ritual was held for the distribution of imaginary spiritual garments to be worn for the journey.

"As each brother knelt before the presiding elder, he received, from an imaginary chest, a coat of twelve different colors, a sky-blue, gold-buttoned jacket covered with fine needlework in floral patterns; a pair of white trousers spangled with stars; white shoes; a white silk handkerchief bordered with gold, and a fur hat of a silver color. To the sisters the eldress distributed gowns of twelve beautiful colors; silver-colored shoes; muslin caps beautifully trimmed; silver colored bonnets; and blue silk gloves. Clothed in these garments emblematic of the virtues of holiness, innocence, meekness, freedom, and peace, the members of every family in the community met the next morning for their journey up the holy hill."

The simple white costumes were to serve as a background for the elaborate and beautiful imaginary spiritual regalia.

Because the Shakers believed in the equality of women as well as separation of the sexes they maintained separate but equal establishments for the production of clothing. Men's clothing was all cut, sewed and fitted by male tailors in the clothier shop. The women's clothing was completely made by tailoresses in the seamstress shop.

Shakers, being frugal and hating waste, were very careful of their clothing and had every available convenience for clothing care and preservation. Each sister was assigned a brother whose clothing she washed, ironed, and mended. Every garment had the owner's initials em-

broidered on it as a finishing touch at the tailor shop. From then on it was easy to identify the owner and know who should be caring for the article. Every sleeping room was supplied with three communal clothes brushes.

To facilitate the chore of caring for clothes a washing mill was invented in 1810 by Shakers at Canterbury (NY.). While their pioneer neighbors were spreading laundry on the grass to dry the Shakers were using clothes lines with their own invention the clothes pin. They also made wooden racks for drying clothes.

They had oval wooden boxes for storage as well as chests with lids and chests of drawers. The walls in the attics of Shaker buildings had built in drawers for storage. And of course, the walls of every room in a Shaker dwelling had peg rails that could be used to temporarily hang a hat or jacket while eating or working.

On the dormitory floor were several large clothes presses. The walls of the presses were lined with the common Shaker pegged boards, and clothing was stored and aired by hanging from the pegs.

As Shakers were as self-sufficient as possible, the activities surrounding the manufacture of clothing claimed a large portion of the work and time in a commune.

They grew their own flax for linen, they had flocks of sheep for wool, and even grew their own silk worms. The preparation of the raw material, the carding, spinning, dyeing, weaving, fulling, cutting, sewing, etc., took the cooperation of most of the women and some of the men in every village. But the end products were of the finest in the world and were in great demand everywhere. These fine pieces of Shaker workmanship did indeed express a creative unity between God and man.

Shakers saw themselves, in theory, as continuing co-creators with God. God created the world for man's use. They observed the natural laws of creation and sought to perpetuate the essence and simplicity of the original creation in their life style.

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